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ABSTRACT

Discussions about the basic communication course abound at the National Communication Association Convention and at other meetings, in the "Basic Communication Course Annual," and in the journal "Communication Education." Little progress has been made, however, on seven issues of central importance to the basic course in higher education. The aim is to initiate a discussion by those in positions to address these issues--basic course directors and basic course instructors. These issues are: (1) it is assumed that students should be better oral communicators when they leave the basic course than when they enter; (2) the basic course should prepare students to be effective communicators in multiple situations--the course best suited to establish the foundations of communication competence is the hybrid course; (3) communication educators need to identify the specific skills they want students to understand and practice in the basic course; (4) the basic course offers an opportunity for students to know, practice, and master specific communication skills; (5) studies and reports suggest that the communication skills undergraduate students should learn may be grouped into five areas: listening skills, interpersonal communication skills, group communication skills, public speaking skills, and strategic skills for participation in varied communication situations; (6) preparing students to be fluent oral communicators in their future personal and professional lives should be a central goal specific to the basic course; and (7) communication educators need to take control of the basic course, to make decisions based on research and data. Contains 20 references. (NKA)

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The Basic Course in the Post-Secondary Institution

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The Basic Course in the Post-Secondary Institution

Discussions about the basic communication course abound at the National Communication Association Convention, state and regional conferences, basic course directors' meetings, in the *Basic Communication Course Annual*, and in *Communication Education*. However, little if any progress has been made on issues of central importance to the basic course in higher education. This paper articulates seven issues that have been discussed before with little resolution. It is understood that the basic course lives in two political environments -- the national one and, probably more important, the local one on each campus. The issues listed below are ever-present in both political arenas.

The basic communication course in higher education remains a viable and essential course for students. The future of the basic course in higher education is bright. However, the issues articulated below need immediate attention on every campus **and** at the national level. Without a coherent stand among the community of basic course directors and faculty, the isolation resulting from budgetary issues and the local political climate will become even more oppressive.

Each issue is important and they are not presented in any rank order. I apologize for my own bias in rambling at times in offering my point of view of some of these issues. One of my

biases that should be clear is my strong belief that the basic communication course should be skills oriented. The purposes of this presentation is to raise the issues, even though they are not new ones, and to initiate a discussion by those in positions to address them -- basic course directors and basic course instructors.

Issue One

The basic communication course continues to be at the crossroads and in the crosshairs in higher education. As we enter the 21st century, the demands placed on communication educators to produce students who can communicate effectively continues to grow; whether through university-wide oral communication requirements or the enlightened academic programs requiring oral communication courses for their students. Parents, legislators, and faculty continue to expect us to teach students to be "good" communicators. They also want us to do this in one oral communication course -- "to dream the impossible dream." Although unrealistic, it is reality.

Regional accrediting agencies, administrators, legislators, parents, and students raise questions related to the quality of the educational experience in higher education. As a result, communication educators, along with all their colleagues, face issues of assessment, accreditation, and teaching communication competence. Assessment demands we measure student oral communication effectiveness after completing the beginning

communication course and, if the accrediting program on campus is complete, near graduation.

The underlying assumption made by many of our colleagues on our campuses is that students should be better oral communicators when they leave the basic course than when the enter. Measuring and reporting on our effectiveness will be increasingly important to us so we can wage the rhetorical (and real) battle for our share of dwindling resources -- both monetary and staffing. Nothing could place our discipline in more jeopardy than falling into the "Catch-22" trap of claiming students will be better oral communicators at the end of the basic communication course. At best, and I mean *at best*, we should be able to report that students can perform specific and identifiable skills better at the end of the basic course.

Issue Two

Traditionally, our focus in the basic communication course has been on teaching speaking or talking skills. In the most popular basic course (public speaking), we teach students to be good public speakers. In the second most popular basic course (the hybrid or blend course), we touch on improved public speaking skills, how to participate in groups, and how to maintain good interpersonal relationships with others. We have paid little attention to helping students beyond teaching specific skills to be better "talkers". In my estimation, these "talking" skills are equally important to the teaching of

effective listening skills. It is not my intention here to minimize the importance of teaching "talking" skills. If we broaden the scope of the application of these skills to a receiver-orientation, then we might be able to help students to be better communicators in their personal and professional lives. It's time we take some initiative and move beyond a two-thousand-year-old-paradigm, and prepare students to be effective communicators (talkers and listeners) in multiple situations and with the technologies that effect our oral communication today and in the future.

The course best suited to establish the foundations of communication competence for undergraduate students is the hybrid course. To set the stage for the ongoing oral communication skill development in undergraduate students, the basic communication course clearly establishes that foundation. The skills students learn in the basic communication course will be the skills they exercise when talking in their philosophy, English, sociology, and math courses. We are also hoping that these skills will be the ones students use after graduation in their personal and professional lives. Seiler (1993) wrote, "Because of the diversified nature and multi-plural society we are living in, the hybrid course has the flexibility and structure to adapt to change better than any of the other introductory speech communication courses" (p. 52). The hybrid basic communication course introduces students to talking and, if we make the necessary modifications, listening skills in interpersonal,

group, pubic communication situations they will likely face. The hybrid course sets a skill foundation for students to develop their communication skills; the ones identified by employers, professionals and alumni. In setting this foundation in the hybrid course, oral communication assignments in other disciplines can be designed to further enhance a student's communication skills. These oral communication assignments are best designed and utilized **after** specific communication skill training in the basic course. The communication skill foundation must be established by the best qualified faculty with specific training in communication skill development and evaluation -- us, communication educators.

Issue Three

Communication educators need to identify the specific skills we want students to understand and practice in the basic communication course. By identifying these skills, we will be in a better position to report if or how students have improved in specific areas as a result of the basic communication course. We need to examine this all-important issue and establish the parameters of this education at the national level and then apply it on each campus. Our discipline should be able to identify a core set of communication skills undergraduate students should and could perform in the basic course and beyond. However, this is the exact problem -- we can't or won't do this. I think we **must** design and implement a universally-applied model of

appropriate communication skills to teach in the basic communication course. We are simply too far from this common approach at the present time. Communication educators cannot even agree on an approach to the basic communication course (Is it public speaking? Is it the hybrid course? Is in a theory course in a liberal education program?). We need a common approach -- a common body of knowledge and a common set of skills -- to teach students. Failure to do this leads us down the path of eventual self-destruction on many campuses as budgets become tighter and accountability becomes even more of a driving force for self-preservation in the academy. This fact alone places us in the crosshairs of our colleagues' budget-battling guns.

By reviewing the literature and available instructional materials, communication faculty should be able to identify specific skills to be included in the basic communication course. These skills are within the normal teaching purview of communication faculty and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs); they are discrete and lend themselves to progress and outcome-based assessment; and they can be explained to non-communication instructors so as to enable faculty to monitor whether and how students in upper-level courses in other disciplines to continue to use them, or not -- and to what degree (skill level).

Teaching oral communication skills in diverse and varied communication contexts seems a good starting point for the student taking only one communication course -- the basic course. Focusing on just public speaking, group or interpersonal

communication skills leaves out many other important and more common communication contexts. Students need specific communication skill development in preparation for successful participation in the varied contexts they find themselves. There is no agreement among teachers or directors of basic communication courses about what skills or contexts that ought to be included in the basic communication course. There is little leadership from the National Communication Association guiding instruction in any specific direction regarding the mission of or content in the basic communication course. Seiler and McGukin (1989) concluded, "No agreement could be reached as to what the basic course is or what course best represents it!" (p. 29). These disagreements were evident during the Midwest Basic Course Directors Conference in 1996 when participants could not agree on a set of specific communication skill competencies for students in the basic course or on what the goals of the basic communication course ought to include.

It is not sufficient to suggest that the skills we teach in the introductory public speaking course, the most popular basic communication course, translate to other communication contexts beyond graduation. Bendtschneider and Trank (1990) agreed when they stated, "Obviously, students need the skills which have been identified by experienced faculty as those necessary to help them succeed in their academic course work. However, they also need communication skills which will carry over after graduation to ensure success in their chosen professions" (p. 187).

Communication educators only agree on superficial and politically correct levels on what communication skill development programs ought to be part of the basic communication course. Suggesting that public speaking skills provide these needed skills is not an accurate conclusion. In the public speaking course, how are we noting any skill transference beyond the classroom experience of the student to their career?

As a result, a broader repertoire of skills for varying contexts seems an appropriate for the basic communication course. Seiler (1993) argued, "Because of the diversified nature and the multi-plural society we are living in, the hybrid course has the flexibility and structure to adapt to change than any of the other introductory speech communication courses" (p. 56). Pearson and West (1991) concurred stating, "Since the introductory course serves as the sole exposure to the communication field, it is imperative that the course be as comprehensive as possible" (p. 29). They continue their argument for the hybrid communication course, "The hybrid course has a diversified portfolio and is more likely to survive in uncertain times than are the individually invested courses we teach" (p. 31). The strengths of the hybrid communication course are in the breadth of coverage of communication skills in the course, its comprehensive orientation to teaching multiple communication skills, and its potential to provide students with opportunities to learn, albeit at an introductory level, different skills for differing communication situations. The hybrid communication course provides a broad

foundation for the ongoing oral communication skill development in future courses or in their personal and/or professional lives.

With the hybrid course remaining the second most popular option for basic communication course programs around the country, those of us interested in the hybrid course are ready to increase program interest and respond to student demands for practical training in oral communication skills. Pearson and West (1991) reported, "A survey of college students and alumni found that, regardless of the nature of the introductory course experienced, both students and alumni believed the hybrid course to be most appropriate" (p. 28).

The foundations for the hybrid communication course rely on the notion that students need to learn interpersonal communication skills, group leadership and group participation skills *in addition* to public speaking skills. These skills can be emphasized throughout a student's undergraduate education. Seiler (1993) concluded, "In fact, surveys of alumni (DiSalvo, 1980; Pearson, Sorenson, & Nelson, 1981) have consistently found that interpersonal communication, giving information and making decisions with another person, or providing information to groups of individuals to be more important than strictly public skills" (p. 51).

Issue Four

The differing approaches to communication skill training and assessment in the basic communication course have left speech

communication educators concerned about the basic course with a set of current and future problems. These varied approaches to the basic course have little, if any, validity in their application. To support this claim, all we have to do is examine the various critique sheets in our textbooks and instructors' manuals used in our courses for evaluation of student performances. If this doesn't convince you, take five communication instructors using the **same** critique sheet and have them apply those criteria to the same communication performance. The differences in either case are, and will continue to be, astounding. If we cannot agree to the skills to be taught and evaluated in the basic course or in their application during specific assignments, where does that leave us?

The difference between focusing on communication competence and specific communication skills is dramatic. There is no hope of making a student a competent communicator in one basic oral communication course. There is an opportunity to having students know, practice, and master, in differing degrees, specific communication skills.

Below are some example skills that can and should be taught in the basic communication course.

- Students can overcome barriers to effective listening.
- Students can communicate specific levels of trust in their interpersonal communication.
- Students understand the appropriate use power in their interpersonal communication.

- Students know the skills and strategies for initiating, maintaining, and ending interpersonal relationships.
- Students can exhibit the skills and strategies for conflict management.
- Students can demonstrate appropriate leadership skills in a group.
- Students can evidence appropriate member roles in a group.
- Students can demonstrate a variety of decision-making strategies.
- Students can appropriately organize a speech (presentation).
- Students can begin and end a speech (presentation) appropriately.
- Students can use supporting materials appropriately during a speech (presentation).
- Students can deliver a speech (presentation) competently.
- Students can use the strategies of persuasive communication competently.
- Students use appropriate strategies to help listeners understand the verbal and nonverbal messages.

Issue Five

Each accrediting agency emphasizes student training in oral communication skills as central to a bonafide college education. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools articulated a clear position regarding the importance of communication in a

student's undergraduate education; concluding, "If a general education program is based on cognitive experiences, it will typically describe its program in terms of college-level experience that engender such competencies as: capabilities in reading, writing, speaking, and listening" (p. 21). This emphasis on communication skills is central to all college and university accrediting agencies in the United States. The Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (1994) guidelines stated, "General education introduces students to the content and methodology of the major areas of knowledge -- the humanities, the fine arts, the natural sciences -- and helps them to develop the mental skills that will make them more effective learners .... Programs of study ... must contain a recognizable body of instruction in program-related areas of 1) communication, 2) computation, and 3) human relationships" (p. 57). The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (1992) indicated that, "Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English" (p. 12). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1992) concluded, "Within this core [of general education courses], or in addition to it, the institution must provide components designed to ensure competence in reading, writing, oral communication and fundamental mathematical skills" (p. 24). Finally, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1994) pointed out, "Programs and courses which develop general intellectual skills such as the ability to form independent

judgment, to weigh values, to understand fundamental theory, and to interact effectively in a culturally diverse world" (p. 4).

The emphasis on oral communication skill development by each accrediting agency highlights one of the most important problems facing communication educators and course directors of beginning oral communication skills. The issue is for colleges and universities to develop programs in oral communication skills where students learn necessary skills and receive helpful assessment of these skills throughout their undergraduate educational careers.

The problem and all its tendrils was, remains, and will be that we use little if any research, beyond opinions of authors or course directors, to document whether students' communication skills develop as a result of their enrollment in the basic communication course. Seiler and McGukin (1989) stated clearly the exact problem, "Little research, however, has examined the effectiveness of instruction and practice in developing students' competence" (p. 31).

The research literature about communication skill training in and out of the communication discipline is substantial and consistent. Studies have repeatedly found that "giving information and making decisions with another person" (interpersonal communication) and "providing information to groups of individuals" (group communication and public speaking) are the most important communication skills for undergraduate students to learn *prior to* graduation. The focus on oral

communication skills training is generally recognized to be central to any general education program.

Specific Skills. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1994), in a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, summarized seven communication competencies. These competencies included: (1) situational appropriateness, (2) appropriate involvement and responsiveness, (3) adaptability and flexibility in communication with others, (4) clarity in communicating with others, (5) efficiency of communication, (6) goal accomplishment, and (7) politeness (pp. 132-133).

These results have been corroborated by the College Placement Service (1993). Their study concluded that in addition to one's proficiency in a field of study, employers most highly value oral communication and interpersonal skills, followed by demonstrated teamwork and analytical skills (p. 3). Curtis, Windsor and Stephens (1989) identified the top skills which our graduates need to become managers. Their survey of over one thousand personnel managers isolated these communication skills: (1) work well with others one-on-one, (2) gather accurate information from others to make a decision, (3) work well in small groups, (4) listen effectively, and (5) and give effective feedback (pp. 6-14).

Collectively these studies and reports suggest that the communication skills which undergraduate students need to learn may be grouped into five, sometimes overlapping, areas (see a brief listing of sample skills in each of these areas above): (1)

listening skills, (2) interpersonal communication skills, (3) group communication skills (member and leadership), (4) presentational speaking or public speaking skills, and (5) strategic skills for effective participation in varied communication situations.

Issue Six

Beginning communication course textbooks typically discuss language theory and skill development. These are the authors' attempts to help students learn and use language appropriate to the particular situation (occasion) and the specific audience. In spite of these explanations, there remains great variance in what instructors accept as "appropriate" or "acceptable" language use in students' assignments -- whether public speaking (presentational speaking), group, or interpersonal communication assignments. There is a movement in general education requirements at U.S. colleges and universities that identify a goal of oral communication education to be the educated citizen. (See information from any of the college and university accrediting agencies and look at college catalogues where the goals of general education are listed.) With this goal, students are to be better prepared at participating as members of our society. This participation includes being able to articulate ideas clearly, argue coherently, and speak as an educated citizen. This emphasis in current general education requirements and expectations raises an important issue in communication

education. The issue centers on what level of oral fluency or literacy is needed for students to pass the basic communication course. The central question is: *Do we prepare students with the skills necessary so that when they speak, people listen.*

Since oral communication is central to general education requirements, communication educators need to make significant contributions to the development of students oral communication skills. It seems reasonable that a major part of this contribution is teaching students to be better users of our language as a result of their training in the basic communication course. Expecting college students to use college-level verbal skills seems reasonable. Preparing students to be fluent oral communicators in their future personal and professional lives is identified as a central goal to specific to the basic communication course and more broadly to their undergraduate education.

Issue Seven

It is difficult to imagine a scenario where communication faculty let others dictate the content of the communication basic course -- but they do. Frequently, when general education requirements are designed by faculty committees, everyone is an expert in oral communication and feel comfortable in exercising their "expertise" in the design on an oral communication requirement. It is incomprehensible to imagine that communication faculty would be permitted to dictate the course content of a

beginning psychology course, a beginning philosophy course, a beginning biology course, or the English composition courses. No one is in a better position than communication experts to determine the knowledge and skill levels students need to attain to pass the basic communication course. It is high time that communication educators take control of the basic communication course and, perhaps, their destiny. However, these decisions need to be based on research and data -- not personal opinions or personal, and often idiosyncratic, points of view. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Kosloski (1990) pointed out the problem for us when they concluded: "To date, the research that has been conducted in and about the basic course both in speech communication and in noncommunication disciplines has been fragmented and generally non-theoretical. Although many studies have been reported, most are either opinion-based or are limited to experience with a specific program. Very few have examined variables from more than one basic course. Most important for this paper, few systematic attempts to integrate findings and propose a program of basic course research for the future have been made" (p. 193).

This lack of research has been and continues to be a major downfall for the ongoing development of a coherent, research-based basic course. Even with the limited research data available, basic course instructors and directors are hesitant to change their basic courses. Basic course directors should be and are criticized on their campus when they offer courses which cannot demonstrate specific long-term benefits for individual

students. For example, if public speaking skills are those skills a basic course director or instructor deems important, she or he should be able to document the long-term benefits to students' oral communication skill development. Minimally, the basic course director or instructor should be able to document that these public speaking skills are the ones viewed to be important by employers and alumni. The real problem is that no conclusive research exists demonstrating that public speaking skills taught in the basic course are needed by employees or ranked as essential by future employers. Nor has any research been found that documents the transference of the skills in public speaking to other communication situations. With this in mind, other communication skills are recognized to be as important, and perhaps more useful, than skills solely for the public speaking (presentational speaking) context.

The basic public speaking course has been and remains the most offered, the most taken, and the most popular basic course in communication. On the surface, one could conclude that communication educators are obviously providing the service to students that faculty, students, and employers want provided. Let's speculate about this conclusion. First, many faculty on campus are products of educational systems where the communication course they took was a public speaking course -- in the rich classical tradition of Aristotle, Isocrates, and Plato. Therefore, their exposure to communication studies was limited to public speaking. These same faculty also read the studies that

document giving a public speech is one of people's greatest fears. Put this together, and it is easy for faculty in other disciplines to impose their wishes on communication faculty that they teach a public speaking course. Second, many communication faculty are the produce of the same public speaking basic course from their undergraduate programs. However, there is are weaknesses in this view of the importance of public speaking education at the undergraduate level. These weaknesses result from two important factors. First, it has been documented that other communication skills are more desirable than just teaching students how to give persuasive and informative speeches. Second, Gibson, *et al.* (1990), after surveying faculty and course directors about the basic communication course for the fifth time, concluded, "Most of the instructors believe the [basic] course needs some modification, and some of the major concerns are maintaining consistency across sections of the course, the size of the classes, the amount of time available for assignments, and support budget for the course" (p. 255). Some modification is needed -- the movement towards the hybrid communication course needs to gain momentum. Although pragmatic in nature, these concerns expressed by faculty about the basic course are real.

Conclusion

To respond to each of the issues above, I argue for the

following resolutions to be discussed, modified if necessary, adopted and implemented in basic communication courses in higher education:

1] a continued emphasis on specific talking and listening skills, not overall communication competence

2] a discipline-wide agreement on what should be included in the basic communication course on every campus; the hybrid basic communication course appears to be the logical option

3] a re-dedication of our instructors to incorporate data regarding what communication skills are needed by college graduates in their personal and professional lives; the hybrid basic communication course, again, appears the logical choice

4] increase our expectations of student language use; emphasize college-level vocabulary and language use and structure in our interpersonal, group, and public speaking (presentational speaking) assignments

If we fail in any of these areas, we fail ourselves, our students, our colleagues, our universities, our discipline; but more importantly, we fail our society. It seems reasonable to develop a beginning communication course that develops communication skills that meet the needs of students as they enter their careers. This course is the hybrid course because it

teaches students the basics in interpersonal, group, listening, and public communication skills. The diversity of skills in a prospective employee is clearly the agenda reported by employers. Communication educators should rise to the challenge and offer these skills in the one communication course most students take during their undergraduate studies.

Universities should meet the same challenge by requiring students to take additional oral communication-intensive courses during their undergraduate studies. Communication faculty stand ready to implement a communication across the curriculum program and train faculty interested in enhancing the communication skills of their students.

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